The Poetic Focus in Horace, *Odes*, 3, 13

The *O fons Bandusiae* is ostensibly a celebration of the spring. But as the poem progresses, the reader becomes aware of several unusual aspects, especially the description of the sacrifice of the kid in stanzas one and two, the continual shifts away from the spring throughout the poem, and the intrusion of the author in the last stanza. As has often been noticed, the introduction of the poet forces the reader to view the poem as a comment about poetry.(1) But the critics have neglected another implication of this intrusion: the spring and its surroundings are revealed as conditions of the poem. By saying 'See what I can do', Horace invites the reader to look back and to consider the poem not only as a comment on poetry but also as an instrument for presenting images. Consequently, the reader is encouraged to look at the poem from the viewpoint of the methods employed.

The key method is a device I have called the 'poetic focus', a concept which was developed in the following way. The most troubling aspect of the poem is that the emphasis is continually moving around and changing, showing the reader pictures of many different objects and themes built around the central object. The term 'poetic focus' then, is meant to describe the poet's glance at a particular subject.

The poetic focus continually shifts from the spring to its surroundings and back. Horace opens with a two-line description of the spring, but then, at the end of stanza one and in stanza two, a kid is introduced, followed by a description of the sacrifice scheduled to take place on the next day. In stanza three, Sirius fails to affect the spring and the livestock are attracted to its coolness. The fourth stanza predicts nobility for the spring because the poet is describing the oak placed upon the hollow rocks where its waters leap down. In stanza one *fons Bandusiae* is the center of interest, but it appears only obliquely in stanzas two and three, and even in stanza four the poem is focused on it only for an instant before switching to the

(1) Steele COMMAGER, *The Odes of Horace: A Critical Study* (New Haven, 1962), 323-324, and John R. WILSON, *O Fons Bandusiae* in *CJ*, 63, 1967-68, 289-296, both develop this aspect of the poem. Herman FRAENKEL, *Horace* (Oxford, 1957), 203, is carried away with enthusiasm for the rustic imagery of the poem, while COMMAGER, *The Structure of Horace's Odes* (London, 1961), 132, thinks the last stanza is a 'self-advertisement' for the poet.

I am indebted for criticism of this paper to Robert R. EDWARDS of the State University of New York at Buffalo, Jean-Pierre BARRICELLI of the University of California, Riverside, and William C. MCDERMOTT of the University of Pennsylvania.

oak, rocks, and waters. In short the method of presentation consists of quick flashes of a central subject and its environment. This oblique treatment gives the reader a series of pictures in a cinematographic sweep over a particular field of inter-related objects.

The poetic focus is also operative on levels other than the physical. In order to describe these effects, we must first examine some of the other elements, especially the treatment of time and the image patterns.

The capacity of poetry to transcend and use time is not only directly stated in the prediction about the spring's fame, but also developed in the way Horace has interlocked the future and the present: the future sacrifice of the kid and the future status of the spring are intertwined with the present-present (shiny, worthy of flowers) future (sacrifice)-present (cool)-future (noble)-present (oak, rocks, waters).

The poem begins and ends with the present state of the spring, moving from *O fons Bandusiae* to *tuae* at the end. The only event pictured is the sacrifice of the kid. But the sacrifice does not actually occur, it is only foreshadowed. What actually happens is the intrusion of the poet, first in the promised sacrifice and, second, in the promised nobility of the spring. *Splendidior vitro* in line one is a hint of this intrusion. A pane of glass is called to mind, through which one views images. That is, one does not ordinarily look at glass but through it. So here, the reader tends to accept the poetic illusion and looks at the fountain and its environment. But one thing continually reappears, making the poem unusual and troublesome. Horace repeatedly calls attention to himself, both through the use of the future tense and by naming himself. In this way he forces the reader to look *at* the glass as well as through it. The reader is jolted by this continual reminder that he is looking at a medium for presenting images, and that the materials themselves exist only as conditions granted by the author.

The poem, then, in its use of time proclaims that the reader is looking at the frame as well as the pictures within the frame. The interlocking of the future and the present has a three-dimensional effect — just as I see the nearer and farther objects through my office window, except at this moment I am also conscious of the window as an object. Under the influence of the poem I look at the scenery as gradually receding objects within a glass frame. Horace's method differs from this visual parallel in that he has the power to bring temporally-distant objects close to the reader's consciousness. The poem is like a camera which can zero-in on distant objects, and it has the potentiality for moving things around within the frame and creating the effect of looking at distant objects close-up. The sacrifice of the kid is forever locked-in by the poetic glass as a future event, but nevertheless the reader can see the event very clearly. The spring is forever 'destined' to become famous because *fies* is in the future tense, although the modern reader knows that it has been famous for many years.

Of the image patterns, the ones that strike the reader first are the references to subjects which Horace has consistently identified with his art, a device which I call

a "poetic metaphor". Commager discusses a Horatian preoccupation with certain subjects as representations of poetry: flowers, springs, wine, the concept of withdrawal, and certain mythological figures such as Faunus, Bacchus, Mercury, and Venus (2). In the first three stanzas of *Odes*, 3.13, several of these representations appear in a roll call or program of poetic metaphors: the spring itself in line 1, the wine and flowers in line 2, the erotic imagery, and the suggestion of withdrawal in lines 9-12. The effect of the program of metaphors is to preface the specific statement about poetry in the fourth stanza. That is, the phrase *Me dicente* is subtly prepared for by the metaphors. Not only that, but the sudden intrusion of the poet uncovers the poetic metaphors, revealing them for what they are.

The program is not an unusual device, for Horace often employs programs of the subject matter to be discussed (or not discussed) (3). This poem stands out from the other poems dealing with Horace as poet because of the subtlety of the method. The explicit statement is delayed until the end, but the conclusion is prefigured by the metaphors of the first three stanzas. That is, *Me dicente* of the fourth stanza is a "tour de force", forcing the reader to re-view the first three stanzas. The device is not uncommon, occurring for example in *Odes*, 1.1. The unusual element in *Odes*, 3.13 is the metaphoric nature of the program in contrast to the programmatic listing of *subjects* found in most poems of this type.

Another striking image pattern has been overlooked by all the critics, probably because of reluctance to see the erotic in Latin poetry. But, our modern sensibilities must be suspended temporarily in order to understand what is, after all, pagan poetry. In fact, the erotic aspect could go completely unnoticed if the poet had not committed himself in stanza one by describing an overt love situation, the normal sex-life of the kid. In addition to this explicit erotic reference, there are several words and phrases in the poem which, if occurring in isolation, would normally not take on their erotic sense. But, the cumulative effect of the large number of erotically-tinted words gives the poem an undertone which surmounts the logic of literal meaning and can best be described as erotic.

Within the explicitly erotic sense there are several words that at times convey a sexual sense, *domaberis* and *turgida cornibus*, as well as objects that are common accompaniments of love affairs, wine and flowers. The reference to the normal life of the kid as lover quite easily calls to mind the erotic possibilities inherent in these expressions, and the sacrifice itself takes on a marital hue. The common identification of sex and death in ancient poetry also strengthens this impression. The kid should be committing violence for the privilege of mating, but instead he is being forced to mate with the spring in a different way. In this context the tinging of the spring also takes on marital implications. That is, the color contrast of the crystalline spring (*splendidior vitro*) and the kid's blood call to mind the marriage

(2) Chapter 6 of *The Odes*.
(3) *Odes*, 1.1, 1.6, 1.12.

act: the kid will put something into the spring (*inficiet*). Thus, the kid will become the husband of the spring instead of a ewe.

There are other image patterns in the poem which, again, in other contexts might not assume erotic connotations. Fluid words (*sanguine, rivos*, line 8, and *lymphae loquaces*, line 15-16), the animals and plants (*lascivi gregis*, line 8, *tauris*, line 11, *ilicem*, line 14), and inanimate objects (*aquae*, line 11, *cautis ... saxis*, line 14) all have inherent erotic possibilities (4). By a process of recall (especially necessary after the poet's invitation), these expressions also take on their secondary connotations in addition to the more literal pictures that they produce.

In the light of the general erotic tone of the poem, there are two other sets of images in the poem which are best seen as ancillary to the erotic images, death and time. The death theme is explicit in the death of the kid and implicit in the adjectives *gelidos, atrox*, and *fessis* and the adverb *frustra* (5), all of which also have erotic undertones (6). Lefkowitz has developed the suggestion of mortality in the contrasting descriptions of the kid and the spring (7). And, as explained above, the death of the kid is expressed in sexual imagery.

The third theme is not as prominent as the themes of sex and death. Temporal words like *cras* and *primis* introduce a sense of time into the poem. The phrase *flagrantis atrox hora Caniculae* ('Savage hour of flaming Sirius') of line 9 suggests the idea of time and the passing seasons. The *frigus amabile* ('pleasing cold') of line 10 in juxtaposition to the heat of summer suggests the opposite season of the year. This set of images reinforces both the erotic and death imagery because of the cyclical and quantitative aspects of the concept of time.

It is remarkable that sex, death, and time are three dominant image patterns because Horace elsewhere consistently connects these images (8), and because of the introduction of the poet in lines 14-15. Horace seems to be commenting on himself as poet by suggesting some of his most common themes in the image patterns he employs. The pattern of images, then, is another unusual Horatian program, a program of images.

To return to the poetic focus, the thematic elements indicate that the cinematography is not limited to the physical surroundings. The poet's camera has the power to overleap temporal as well as spatial boundaries. Thus, in addition to the present state of the spring, two future events can be seen -- the sacrifice of the kid and the nobility of the spring. The poem makes these future scenes as vivid as the present situation; one sees a picture of both the kid at present and the effect his blood will have on the spring's waters. The future nobility of the spring is brought near, while, at the same time, the poet is describing the surrounding scenery.

(4) See Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879) under the words.
(5) M. R. Lefkowitz, *The Ilex in O Fons Bandusiae in CJ*, 58, 1962, 63-67.
(6) *Cf.* Lewis and Short under the words.
(7) Lefkowitz, *The Ilex*, and Watson, *O Fons Bandusiae*.
(8) *Cf. Odes*, 1.4 and 1.9.

Not only does the poem present a picture of physical objects, but the terms which it employs to describe them also cause other reactions. In stanzas one and two the poem operates on at least two levels — we see the spring and the future sacrifice of the kid, and at the same time we see a marriage because of the marital terms employed. In stanzas three and four we see the spring's environment and sense erotic feelings because of the poet's choice of image patterns. This focus on erotic material is a secondary image worked into the poem, a deeper level of perception within the picture of the rustic situation.

Just as the focus on the physical environment continually shifts, the focus on this secondary image also changes. In stanzas one and two the erotic material intrudes upon the picture of the spring and sacrifice in a forceful way. Once the connection of the erotic with the scenes being presented has been established, the poet needs to suggest it much less overtly in stanzas three and four. Thus, the erotic focus moves gradually from the marital picture of stanzas one and two, to animals and the plow in stanza three, to the oak, rocks, and water of stanza four. That is, the focus moves from what is specifically erotic to the erotic suggested by animals to the erotic suggested by plants, rocks, and water. Consequently, the erotic impingement on the reader's consciousness gradually recedes as the poem progresses.

The "real climax" of stanza four makes the reader look at the poem itself, creating another plane. And this focal plane is also changing because the comments on poetry operate on several levels — most obviously in the statement about the future fame of the spring, less obviously in the two programs, and subtly in the methods employed by the poet. The poetic focus shows the reader all these dimensions of poetic comment — it works like a camera lens which shows one picture within another, except that the poetic focus is capable of showing several dimensions at one time.

In revealing the various levels of comment about poetry, the focus builds toward the conclusion of stanza four. The programs of metaphors and image patterns are hardly noticeable, and the poetic techniques would ordinarily not be considered as comments on poetry. But the intrusion of the poet suddenly brings these various elements to the reader's awareness.

In summary, the poetic focus operates in several ways. In presenting the physical objects it continually shifts from object to object. It jumps temporal boundaries to give close up views of the future and to intertwine the future with the present, and it suggests erotic circumstances with a forcefulness which gradually diminishes. On the other hand, the forcefulness of the poet's presence gradually builds up to the climax. The focus operates on several planes at the same time, shifting emphasis from the physical plane to the thematic plane in stanza one and back to the physical plane in stanzas three and four, all the time keeping the de-emphasized planes visible. The climax comes when the focus suddenly zooms away from the thematic and physical to show the poet himself in operation.

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A Reconsideration of Propertius, III, 10

I have always thought of Propertius III.x as an ironical escape poem where the poet is impervious to any call that is not of the rosiest romanticism. Since the representation here is not that of a "monde renverse" but of a wishful day-dream, in which Cynthia performs a short of propiatory rite to the goddess of love, the irony is not bitter, the poet's anguish recedes, the accent is now on joy, the password is optimism. To set out to retrace that anguish, the most typically Propertian element, and bring it to the foreground of this particular poem seems to me not only a useless task but also a misrepresentation of the poet's intent. The articles of Lyne and Bramble which appeared in the April and October 1973 issues of *Greece and Rome* seem to have done just that. III.x is examined like a poem in a vacuum, unrelated to the Propertian context.

Lyne is concerned with the "unsaid", that is with the unexpressed fear of death shadowing the celebration — hence the hidden anxiety of the lover "at odds with his apparent cheerfulness", which grows to a feverish paroxism and then fades away when he is in bed with Cynthia. Bramble worries about the *memento mori* underlying the poem: *natalis iter* for him is as close to *mortis iter* as it is to *amoris iter*. In his eyes "sexual union takes over from drinking, music and dice as a means of dispelling fear of unconsciousness".

Anxiety? Fear of death? But this is *a poem by Propertius*. Propertius' love life is dominated by one fear and one only, that of losing Cynthia. Death he desires, possibly with Cynthia (*Cynthia finis erit*, I.XII.20) whether she *nudum pectus lacerata* (II.XIIIB.27) follows his bier, or dies with him (*sed non effugies: mecum moriaris oportet*, II.VIII.25) or predeceases him (*cara tamen lacrimis futura meis*, I.XIX.18). Furthermore Propertius is at times quite morbid in his death-wish: his ashes will still feel love (*ut meus oblito puluis amore iacet*, I.XIX.6) and know or tend to the truth (*non nihil ad uerum conscia terra sapit*, II.XIIIB.42). Alive he will be hers, *mortuus huius ero* (II.XV.36). Death for him is the only guarantee of permanence for his love, of rest from his obsessive following of the *castra puellae* because *fas est praeteritos semper amare uiros* (II.XIIIB.52) and *te solam et lignis funeris ustus amem* (III.XV.46).

There is therefore a clear indication that death is a dominant motif in Propertius' elegies. But as soon as we take a look at III.x we can see that it has been intentionally pushed far out of sight. The fear of losing Cynthia, however, is the central problem of Propertius and although it is reduced to a minimum in III.x it cannot be silenced even in this day-dreaming elegy which is a glorification of a day to